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DAYAN SAYS ISRAELIS HAVE THE CAPACITY TO PRODUCE A-BOMBS

In First Statement of Its Kind, He
Asserts None Exist but They
Could Be Made Quickly

Special to The New York Times

JERUSALEM, June 24 — Moshe Dayan, the former Defense Minister and Foreign Minister, said today that Israel had developed the capacity to produce nuclear weapons, and could manufacture bombs "in a short time" should the Arabs do so.

"We don't have any atomic bomb now," Mr. Dayan said. "But we have the capacity, we can do that in a short time. We are not going to be the first ones to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East, but we do have the capacity to produce nuclear weapons, and if the Arabs are willing to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East, then Israel should not be too late in having nuclear weapons too."

Mr. Dayan did not explain what he meant by Israel's not taking steps to "introduce the weapon," but it appeared that this referred to the actual assembling and manufacturing of bombs.

It was believed to be the first time that any Israeli holding or having held a position of authority had confirmed what has long been widely assumed about Israel's nuclear capacity.

Mr. Dayan, who was Defense Minister from 1967 to 1974 and Foreign Minister from 1977 to 1979, made the disclosure in telephone interviews.

Sharp Criticism Is Expected

He said he did not think Israel should exploit its capacity to produce nuclear weapons unless its enemies did so, but he also warned against any delay. "We should not be the first ones," he declared, "but we shouldn't be too late." He declined to say how long it would take to manufacture bombs.

Mr. Dayan is heading his own small party in the June 30 parliamentary elections, and his frank discussion of a subject that is normally taboo here is expected to create a stir of criticism that he has used the issue for political purposes.

Furthermore, it may add weight to the Arabs' arguments, in the wake of Israel's June 7 air strike against an Iraqi nuclear reactor, that the Arab world requires nuclear weapons to balance Israel's strength. Israel has been widely condemned for its attack, which destroyed a reactor nearing completion outside Baghdad. The plant was being built with the help of France and Italy.

It was from France in the early 1960's that Israel obtained a reactor that is in operation near the Negev Desert town of Dimona. A smaller, experimental reactor was bought from the United States.

Military censorship has screened most details of the program from the Israeli public, resulting in little debate over the wisdom of developing a nuclear ability. It was not clear how Mr. Dayan's remarks managed to pass the censorship.

Last year the censor banned the publication of a book by two Israelis on the subject. And authorities rescinded the press accreditation of a part-time reporter for CBS Radio, Dan Raviv, for evading censorship by flying to Rome to file a report alleging that Israel and South Africa detonated a nuclear weapon in a test in the south Atlantic in September 1979. The report was never corroborated.

Fragments of information about Israel's capacity have appeared over the years in the American and European press. In 1977 The New York Times published a report that a ship of West German registry carrying 200 tons of uranium ore disappeared from the high seas in 1968, then reappeared several weeks later under a different flag, with a different name and a different crew — and without the uranium, which American investigators believed had been diverted to Israel.

In 1978 the Central Intelligence Agency issued a five-page memorandum dated September 4, 1974, asserting that "we believe that Israel already has produced nuclear weapons." It said this conclusion

was "based on Israeli acquisition of large quantities of uranium, partly by clandestine means; the ambiguous nature of Israeli efforts in the field of uranium enrichment, and Israel's large investment in a costly missile system designed to accommodate nuclear warheads."

United States Government documents made public in November 1977 showed that the intelligence agencies suspected that Israel had obtained up to 200 pounds of enriched uranium that was declared missing in 1965 from a Pennsylvania factory owned by the Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation.

Several years ago Martin van Creveld, a senior lecturer in history at Hebrew University, argued for silence on the nuclear subject out of concern that Arab countries might, in response in Israel, press the Soviet Union for nuclear technology.

Writing in the English-language Jerusalem Post, Mr. Creveld called the state of uncertainty the most advantageous for Israel. "An A-bomb that is, or is believed to be, 'only a screwdriver away,' is nearly as effective a deterrent as one that is openly brandished," he said.

The Israeli attack on the Iraqi reactor, which Prime Minister Menachem Begin said was based on a conviction that Baghdad would be able to produce nuclear weapons, has strained relations with the United States, which suspended the delivery of four F-16 jet fighters to Israel and voted for a Security Council resolution last week condemning the raid.

On Monday Mr. Begin was reported to have told a parliamentary committee of an American intelligence report that had expressed concern over Iraq's nuclear potential. Mr. Begin replied sharply today after a State Department spokesman had criticized the disclosure. In a prepared statement he said that the information had come not from his office, but from a committee member "who is interested in causing friction."

"And if we are discussing leaks," the Prime Minister's statement added, "Washington's experience is no less rich than that of Jerusalem."